

Teaching the  
Selected Works of  
Walter Dean Myers

## The Young Adult Novels in the Classroom Series

When former Heinemann–Boynton/Cook editor Peter Stillman first conceived the Young Adult Literature (YAL) series in 1990 and asked me to be the series editor, I was excited to be part of such an innovative endeavor. At that time there were few professional books available for teachers who wanted to bring young adult literature into their classrooms, and Heinemann was the first publisher making a concerted effort to fill this need. Seventeen years and many books later, under the direction of Heinemann Executive Editor Lisa Luedeke, the series continues to inform and assist teachers at the middle school, high school, and college levels as they read with and teach to their students the best works that the field of young adult literature has to offer.

The Heinemann YAL Series takes another step forward with the book you hold in your hands. This subseries on teaching the works of specific young adult authors is designed to help you incorporate young adult literature into your curriculum, providing ideas and lessons that you may use and offering examples of classroom-tested student work, lesson plans, and discussion as an impetus to designing your own lessons and developing your own ideas in accordance with your students' needs.

Over the years, many teachers in my graduate young adult literature classes have asked me how to convince administrators and parents that young adult literature is worthy of a place in the curriculum alongside the classics and other commonly taught literary works. In response I have shown them how to write rationales for specific books, how to design lesson plans and units that satisfy state and national standards, how to deal with censorship, and how to become connoisseurs of young adult literature themselves. I hope that the books in this subseries, by focusing on specific authors of young adult literature and highlighting the successful work of teachers with this genre, will inspire confidence in you to bring these extraordinary works into your curriculum, not just as a bridge to the classics, but as literary works in their own right.

—Virginia R. Monseau

*Teaching the Selected Works of Robert Cormier*

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*Teaching the Selected Works of Katherine Paterson*

*Teaching the Selected Works of Walter Dean Myers*

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Connie S. Zitlow

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about war. I also wish to acknowledge the many students who answered my questions and shared their work with me. I hope I have conveyed some of the depth of how reading the wonderful literary works of Walter Dean Myers has enriched their lives. As these teachers and students know, his books certainly have an important place as part of the middle and high school curriculum.



## I N T R O D U C T I O N

Walter Dean Myers, a premier author of books for children and young adults, has published more than 100 literary works since 1968 when he won a writing contest for the text of his first picture book, *Where Does the Day Go?*, published in 1969. His productivity is astounding, both in numbers of literary works and in the variety of genres in which he publishes: fiction, poetry, short stories, a play, picture books, a memoir, and works of nonfiction that include history, biography, and some of his own genealogy. His works have received numerous awards, including Newbery Honors, *Boston Globe-Horn Book* Honors, and numerous Coretta Scott King Awards. His books frequently appear on lists of the best books of the year by organizations such as the American Library Association and are chosen as New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age. Walter Dean Myers received the first Michael L. Printz Award for *Monster*, a work that was also a National Book Award Finalist. For his body of work, he was honored with the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) Award, the Margaret A. Edwards Award, and the Virginia Hamilton Literary Award. He is a gifted, compassionate, introspective, humble person who speaks and writes with eloquence and a sincerity that has endeared him to readers of all ages.

Significant as a literary artist and an accomplished storyteller, Walter Dean Myers is also important as a black male writer who

consistently publishes books for teens. In his humble way, he refers to his writing as talking to himself and letting children listen. His ear for dialogue, his use of rich imagery, and his careful choice of language bring to life his memorable characters as readers see, hear, and smell the richness of the vivid settings of his stories. He attributes his love of reading and writing to his early experiences: "My formal education began in the Harlem apartment of my foster parents, Herbert and Florence Dean," he stated in his essay "And Then I Read . . ." (2001a, 58). After her day's work was done, his foster mother would read to him from *True Romance* magazines. He learned that written words had meanings that he could translate into oral vocabulary and therefore understand. Even when he was very young, he and his mother had real conversations as they talked about where they would go on their walks and what they would do together.

Walter Dean Myers learned to read before entering school. But school was a misery to him because of his speech impediment, something he has since learned was genetic. In school his classmates laughed and teased him; his response was to lash out and fight. Because reading in front of the class was the worst part of his life, he learned to write poetry using words that he knew he could pronounce. When Mrs. Conway, his fifth-grade teacher, caught him reading comic books, she took them away and gave him a stack of "good" books to read. That was the same year he not only spent time playing ball but also discovered the local branch of the New York Public Library and devoured stories.

He continued to be an avid reader throughout his youth, even hiding in a tree at the park to read. But he did not find himself in the books he read. Because as a young teen he was confused about his encounters with race, he thought he would stop being an African American. He wanted to be something that was not "Negro" like the maid or janitor portrayed in the books he read. Instead, he decided he would be an intellectual, someone who read books. He also wrote, primarily poetry that imitated the British poets he studied in school. It was not until he was in his twenties when he read works by Langston Hughes and James

Baldwin that he felt he had permission to write about Harlem, where he had grown up.

Walter Dean Myers' contribution to the literature that illuminates the lives and history of African Americans is invaluable, and he writes about his people with affection and humor, along with great literary skill and a seriousness of purpose (Bishop 1997, 394). With teens often as the central characters in his stories, his works convey the strengths of extended black families, and the importance of close relationships and of trust and love among family and friends. His stories leave readers with powerful pictures of young people's personal growth as they experience the pressures of living on big city streets. Yet, his insight into what it means to be human crosses all racial and ethnic boundaries. He cares deeply about the young people who are treated as "the others," those who are not the good students in school, who are not the perfect children. To him, diversity means humanizing *all* peoples (Myers 2005b).



## His Books in School Settings

Since 1982 I have been reading countless works of young adult literature, teaching graduate and undergraduate young adult literature courses, and visiting many middle and high school classrooms. In each school setting, regardless of the students' age or grade level, Walter Dean Myers' works always have a profound impact on readers. Yet, particularly when college students read *Fallen Angels* (1988a) and more recently *Monster* (1999b), they ask questions about using the books in their middle and high school classrooms when they become teachers. They express concerns about some of the language use and the difficult situations and issues in the books. They express surprise when I tell them that I know *Fallen Angels* is a book some high school students read on their own and that *Monster* is a favorite of many students in our local middle school.

At Dempsey Middle School in Delaware, Ohio, two eighth-grade teachers, Maggie Massaro and Judy Hollander, work with

librarian Karen Hildebrand to plan and teach a unit on Walter Dean Myers, a unit that covers from three to eight weeks, depending on the year. It is a favorite unit for them and for their students, who first hear an overview about the author and his works and then choose books from an extensive class set and library collection. The goals for the unit focus on students enjoying and appreciating literature. They also learn about various genres of literature, participate in well-designed lessons that address many language arts standards, choose books for individual reading, listen to select works read aloud, produce informal and formal written works, take part in small group and whole class discussions, and complete a poetry project at the culmination of the unit. For this book, I observed the middle school classes, interviewed the librarian and two teachers, and collected a variety of instructional materials and student work samples. The first three chapters include information drawn from the work done in the middle school; however, ideas from the unit can be adapted to fit other grade levels, including high school settings.

Any book about teaching the works of Walter Dean Myers must include a chapter on *Fallen Angels* because of the significance of this novel, which has become for students and many teachers a work of historical fiction. In the middle school, one of the teachers permits her more mature readers to use this work as an individual choice book, but it is not used for whole class lessons. However, at a nearby high school in Powell, Ohio, Olentangy Liberty High School, English teacher Zana Adams teaches a unit she designed with librarian Kathy Orr. The central work of the unit, which focuses on the randomness and extremes of war, is *Fallen Angels*. Students learn about the Vietnam War and consider issues that compare and contrast with those of past wars and current situations. A second English teacher, Christopher Moore, also uses the book with his students whose reading of *Fallen Angels* begins with poetry and short stories as they probe ideas about war and heroes. Their reading of the novel leads to written work in various formats and culminates in a poetry-protest song project.



## Book Overview

As a boy, the person who became Walter Dean Myers wanted to be good, but he didn't know where he fit in, so he rejected the value system that seemed unattainable. Today the multitudes of readers who admire his books find inspiration in the story of what occurred in his life between his youth and his many achievements in the literary world. Therefore, information about his life and how he became a writer is blended in each chapter of this book as it relates to his literary works. In addition, each chapter includes instructional ideas about how teachers use his books in classrooms and how students respond to them.

Chapter 1, "I Was Not in the Books': Walter Dean Myers, the Man and His Works," includes highlights about the author's life, his early experiences, and his body of work, as introduced to the eighth-grade students by Karen Hildebrand, the middle school library media specialist. Her multimedia approach is the "kickoff" of the Walter Dean Myers Unit for students in the grade eight language art classes. Interspersed in this first chapter are images of the Harlem of Myers' youth as portrayed in his stories and poems, including the beautiful poetry collection *Here in Harlem: Poems in Many Voices* (2004b), and what he describes as his set of themes: father-son relationships, identity problems, aspects of human vulnerability as he understands them, and the values he hopes to bring to those who have not been valued. This chapter also includes an exploration of his memoir *Bad Boy* (2001b), of the novels *Handbook for Boys: A Novel* (2002a) and *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* (2005a), and of numerous works of nonfiction, including his picture books for older readers.

Although there is a consistency in his basic themes, Myers continues to expand the literary elements of his craft by exploring the possibilities of language and form. In each subsequent chapter, there is an elaboration of these literary elements in the many genres of his works and information about how teachers have used his works in various classrooms.

Chapter 2, “‘I Tell Stories Too, Only I Write Mine Down’: Stories in Many Genres,” focuses on how middle school students come to know some of the many forms/genres of Myers’ stories, primarily the short stories “The Treasure of Lemon Brown” (1983) and “Reverend Abbott and Those Bloodshot Eyes” (1996a). Students also explore the stunning visual and written images in his picture books, poetry, and the play *Cages* (1990a). These works speak powerfully about the many aspects of what it means to be human, as noted in students’ written responses to the photos and poetry in *Brown Angels: An Album of Pictures and Verse* (1993a), *Glorious Angels: A Celebration of Children* (1995a), and *Angel to Angel: A Mother’s Gift of Love* (1998b).

One of the goals of the Walter Dean Myers Unit is to give students the opportunity to learn about a variety of genres. The students read *One More River to Cross: An African American Photograph Album* (1995b) as an introduction to Myers’ works of nonfiction, particularly the African American history that is an important part of his writing. Their study of *One More River to Cross* includes written work in which they explore the theme of the words and pictures of the book.

Chapter 3, “Life in Harlem: Choice Novels and Poetry,” includes the favorite novels teachers select for whole class reading, especially Myers’ first novel, *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* (1975), and the students’ self-selected books ranging from the humorous *The Young Landlords* (1979) to the realistic *The Beast* (2003a) and *Shooter* (2004d). Intertwined in the chapter is information about the written work and projects students produce based on their choice book, such as the novels *Slam!* (1996b), *Monster* (1999b), *Scorpions* (1988b), and various works of historical fiction. Using their choice book, students complete a poetry project as the culmination of the unit. This chapter concludes with a summary about how the unit matches various local and national academic content standards.

Chapter 4, “*Fallen Angels*: Young Adults and the Extremes of War,” focuses on a high school unit that centers on *Fallen Angels*. In this novel, Myers expresses what he sees as the waste of war,

the lies that are told about it, and how sanitized and glorified it is, particularly to young people. This powerful novel conveys that the real obscenity is not the language used by the soldiers but the war itself. When young people read *Fallen Angels*, they learn about the randomness of war and its long-lasting effects. This chapter includes information about how teachers provide background knowledge about Vietnam and address key facts and false ideas about the war, and how they use a variety of print and non-print media for well-planned activities that occur as students read, write about, and discuss the novel. The activities and projects that extend students' understanding of the novel and the unit's theme include using related poetry and films. Students participate in multiple writing opportunities ranging from research papers on a chosen topic to essays that probe how a particular theme is developed throughout the novel. In an excellent culminating activity, students analyze poetic devices used in the lyrics of 1960s protest songs.

"Many Ways to Tell a Story: Three Remarkable Novels" is the title of Chapter 5. As Walter Dean Myers continues to expand his craft, the significance of the style and also the complex issues in *Monster*, *Shooter*, and *Street Love* (2006b) warrant special attention. In *Monster* Steve Harmon tells his story with his first-person handwritten memoir and his typed screenplay. The variety of surface effects such as drawings, photographs, mug shots, and video stills adds to the complexity of the social and racial issues raised in this multilayered, cinematic story. The style itself makes this novel worth exploring, and mature readers are aware of the intertextuality in *Monster*, which expands their appreciation of the artistry of Myers' literary works.

Myers is concerned about young people and what makes them violent. In *Shooter*, Myers shows that people who are outsiders look for others who are outsiders. In this book, pieces of the story are told in various print formats, including reports, newspaper articles, and diary entries. The story in *Street Love* is conveyed in free verse that is a blend of iambic pentameter and street language. It is another beautiful and touching example of the artistry of this

award-winning author, his concern about young people, and his place as one of the most important writers of literature for young people.



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